

# The Politics of DIVISION



**An engagement with Identity politics**

**A contribution to the debate**



**Anarchist Communist Group**

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identity politics**  
***A contribution to the debate***

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# **The Politics of Division: An engagement with Identity Politics – *A contribution to the debate***

## **Introduction**

Anarchist communists seek revolutionary social change. We want to create a society in which exploitation is abolished and all resources are held in common. We also struggle for a society without a State and in which no group oppresses another: a society without hierarchies. We envisage a society of co-operation, mutual aid, equality and freedom.

These values and aspirations are not confined to any one group of people; they are universal and not culturally relative. All over the world and throughout history, people have struggled against exploitation and oppression, for freedom and well-being. People may not have called themselves anarchist communists and the struggles have been manifested in different ways, but the urge and vision are the same. This new society would result in the liberation of all humanity. As Kropotkin wrote in *The Conquest of Bread*: “What we proclaim is the Right to Well-Being; Well-Being for All!”

Anarchist communists see capitalism as the fundamental obstacle to the creation of a new society because as an economic system it underpins most aspects of the way society is structured. The fact that only a few own and control the earth’s resources, such that most of us have to sell our labour to this ruling class, and that all production is driven by profit over need, dominates society and our lives. However, there are also other systems of oppression that have a longer history and are interwoven with capitalism. The existence of a State brings together oppressive structures and institutions that help facilitate capitalist exploitation.

Patriarchy, the domination of men over women, has existed since the first gender division of labour was created and women became the property of men. The fear of, hatred and enslavement of the 'other' has also been with us since our early origins. The most familiar recent manifestation of this has been racism as a result of colonialism and the spread of mercantile capitalism which emerged from the more 'developed' Europe whose population became 'white' through their relationship with less developed areas populated by what would become 'black' people. In other words, the notion that there are black or white races is a political creation, and people were allocated to the categories according to economic expediency of the ruling class. Indeed, some groups we may think of as "white" now – due to skin colour – were not always admitted to the "white" race.

Society is blighted by discrimination against many groups: people who have a different sexuality, people with disabilities, those who struggle against the straitjacket of gender categories. All these and more have suffered not just at the hands of society, but often too at the hands of people from their own class. These systems of oppressions, these real-life experiences, will affect how individuals experience capitalism, and even affect how they perceive their own class. This means that there is no 'one size fits all' anti-capitalist strategy.

Creating an anarchist communist society in which all exploitation, hierarchy and oppressions will be abolished is a large and difficult task. It means that we need to create a mass movement which must ultimately involve all the working class. We use the term working class to include all those of us who cannot live on the proceeds of their property or capital, so therefore need to sell their labour power in order to survive – in other words, the vast majority of the population. However, class unity cannot be achieved at the expense of ignoring real inequalities within the class. Getting rid of capitalism will not necessarily mean the end of all oppressions and getting rid of oppressions such as sexism or racism will not get rid of capitalism. Therefore, anarchist communism requires an approach that can end both capitalism and all oppressions.

This pamphlet looks at how identity politics, while being born in the recognition that revolutionary movements have often been insensitive to the voices of oppressed groups, and indeed inherited attitudes from the dominant society, has nevertheless taken a wrong turn in changing politics to be about identities rather than about the goal of creating a completely new society.

Since the ACG bases its politics on its aspirations for a new society, our aspirations for that new society also inform how we struggle now against exploitation and oppression.

Our goals and values apply to everyone, whatever their identity. Being critical of identity politics is controversial and widely misunderstood and misconstrued. We must therefore begin by being clear that when we say we are critical of identity politics, this does not mean we oppose fighting oppression. Indeed, we disagree with identity politics precisely because we believe it entrenches inequality and oppression and makes it more difficult for us to achieve the overall goal of



anarchist communism. Focusing only on discrimination against one particular group within capitalism can often lead to a reinforcement of inequalities. It is not about ensuring there is the right proportion of women, black and disabled business leaders or trans, Muslim and gay cops. It is about ending oppression, not about having oppressors with the right diversity ratio.

## The significance of identity



Identity is part of humanity. We have relationships with others – mother, lover, teacher, neighbour, and so on. We are born into a specific culture which affects the language we speak, what we like to eat, what music we listen to. There is an endless list of human engagement and activity and these relationships and activities inform our identities. Having different identities is not necessarily a problem in itself; it creates a welcome diversity – it would be boring if we were all the same.

However, identities divide people. If you are one thing then you are automatically not something else – if you support one football team then you don't support another, if you identify as a jazz-fan, then you are not a jazz-hater.

Potential conflict therefore is inherent in the fact that people have different identities. This does not necessarily have to be a problem, as long as one group doesn't have more power than another and where differences and conflict are managed in a free and equal society.

Many of our identities are to an extent chosen – we can choose to become a parent or a rock climber. We can choose to become an anarchist communist or a Conservative.

We then live with the consequences of that choice. These choices may then have socially significant implications for our lives and indeed the lives of others.

Other identities are not chosen but imposed upon us; we do not choose them or want them to be socially significant. It is the way society is structured that makes them critical to our lives. We do not choose to be born within a specific culture or religion. We do not choose to be born working class or ruling class, male or female, black or white skinned, able bodied or disabled. Many people may not see these as part of who they are at all – yet they are forced to because society

makes them important. For example, someone may have been born Jewish in Germany in the 20s and 30s but did not identify as being Jewish. They maybe became an atheist or saw themselves as German. For the Nazis, this did not matter. Regardless of your own perception of your identity, being Jewish was imposed by the structures in society and you had to face the horrendous consequences of this.

Another way of looking at this is through the concept of social difference. All humans are different but only some of these differences become socially significant, only some have a serious impact on our lives. In an anarchist communist society these social differences will no longer have any impact on our lives and our place in society. To ensure that these differences cease to be important, we need to fight against socially imposed differences. There will still be differences and people will choose to have different identities, but within anarchist communist society they will only create welcome diversity, not oppression and exploitation.

## **Way forward: Identity politics or a united anti-capitalist revolutionary movement?**



Identity politics is one way of fighting the oppression caused by social differences. By starting from one's experience of difference and the oppression that is experienced, people focus on their particular struggle. This is understandable. However, identity politics is more than fighting one's own oppression. It can be defined as the moving from experiencing the often horrendous consequences of social difference to then identifying with that oppressed group and giving that group essential characteristics that then differentiate from other groups who are equally exploited and oppressed.

Instead of seeing the oppression as part of a wider system – capitalism – the focus is on the discrimination and oppression experienced by one group. It is a preoccupation with the oppression of one particular social group or culture, assumed to have certain essentialist characteristics, without reference to the wider system and without the overall goal of finding common ground with the wider working class. Social differences are created by society - creating discrimination and oppression. The problem then lies with people actually embracing this difference and using it as the main basis of struggle, rather than seeking to abolish all social difference. This then becomes identity politics which ends up reinforcing social differences such that we cannot join together to create a society where we are all just human beings and any differences between us have no social significance.

Identity politics can be illustrated also through the contrast between nationalism and internationalism or universalism. For often understandable reasons, when a nation or ethnic group has been oppressed, people identify with that nation or group – this is the main division they see. They see themselves as belonging to a particular ‘tribe’ no matter what position they hold. The division between the ruling class and working class, the commonality between all workers across borders is ignored as even the poorest side with the rich and powerful of their nation. Similarly with identity-based struggles against oppression – it is all women or Black or disabled people together rather than as members of the working class.

## **Capitalism and other systems of oppression**

This analysis, based on identity, downplay the link between one’s lived experience and place in the structures of capitalist society. Racism and sexism have a long history and pre-date capitalism. Nevertheless, systems such as patriarchy and racially-based colonialism are fundamental parts of capitalism and therefore anti-racism, anti-sexism and other struggles against oppressions must be explicitly anti-capitalist.

Women’s unpaid labour in the home makes it possible for labour to be reproduced at no cost to capital. The slave trade and plunder of Africa and Asia were key to providing the capital for the Industrial Revolution along with untold wealth for a few.

There is a gender and racial division of labour – with women and people of colour at the bottom. They do the bulk of essential work at a very low cost to employers and the State, and are hit hard both in terms of health and loss of income.

Capitalism is based on divide and rule: to ensure that there is a constant supply of flexible and insecure labour paid at the lowest rates. Capitalism sets us against each other to maintain super-profits and exploitation. Identity politics sets us against each other to maintain the primacy of the individual and often competing oppression thus dividing us as a class.

This is why it is vital that we unite to fight against capitalism; no one can be free until we all are free.

## Benefits of the politics of difference

Though we argue for a united working class, this cannot be a false unity. The divisions in society manifest themselves also as divisions in the working class. It is not very helpful to be told that male workers are really on your side as they cross your picket line as you fight for equal pay. When a Black person is being beaten up by a group of white youths, it doesn't make it any better that they are also working class. It is not at all surprising that different oppressed groups feel that much of the working class does not actually understand their situation and therefore choose to organise separately. Identity politics has become so popular because of many inadequacies of the working-class movement.

However, without bringing the working class together to fight both capitalism and oppressions, we will never actually manage to create an anarchist communist society. Separate struggles, which may at times form alliances, will only achieve so much. It may not be easy but the goal has to be a united working class movement that is able to address the very big weaknesses within it.

### Culture as identity: the problems of cultural relativism

The trend in recent decades towards anti-rationalism – the distrust of reason, believing it to be the cultural expression of a European elite – has seen the rise in what is termed 'cultural relativism' – the idea that values should be applied differently to different identities.

Fortunately, racial differences have now been clearly shown to be negligible; there are more genetic differences within populations than between them. Now culture has taken its place as the boundary between different groups of people. "It's not easy to imagine a person, or people, bereft of culture. The problem with grand claims for the necessity of culture is that we can't readily imagine an alternative. It's like form: you can't not have it". (Kwame Anthony Appiah: *Ethics of Identity*, p126).



*David Hume*

The idea of culture as a fixed, bounded element is what underpins cultural relativism. We are all born into a culture and it is very much a part of who we are, our identity. Differences between cultures are what makes the world interesting and struggles to save cultures from the onslaught of capitalist globalisation are in many ways to be welcomed. Nevertheless, no culture is a fixed entity nor is it monolithic.

The philosopher David Hume's idea of the 'is-ought fallacy' is relevant here. Just because a culture **is** does not mean that this is the way a group **ought** to live.

We can describe the various ways of life that exist but that does not mean that these need to become "life scripts" (KA Appiah).

Humans as social beings are transformative beings. Cultures don't stand still. And even if they did, what would it mean to say that a 16-year-old British 'Asian' girl with Bangladeshi ancestry shared the same culture as a 50-year-old man in Dhaka? It makes no sense to say that there is a single homogenous culture that those two people share. To demand that every individual is integrated into a particular cultural group is to fail to grasp that. Just because one might have Irish ancestry, does that mean one cannot truly be oneself unless one speaks Irish Gaelic or performs some activity decided from above to be a necessary prerequisite of Irishness, like setting up road-side shrines to Mary?

Then comes the demand that cultures be protected and preserved. People like political philosopher, Will Kymlicka, and communitarian thinker, Charles Taylor, claim that the survival of particular cultures is essential to people's lives. Yes, no people should have their culture destroyed by a more powerful group or because of the encroachment of capitalism. People need to be able to make their own choices.

However, cultures should not be preserved for the sake of it. For example, during the nationalist 'Quiet Revolution' in Quebec in the 1960s, then strengthened by further legislation in 2002, children who had French ancestry had to go to French medium schools. No personal choice was permitted. This was only overturned in 2009. Cultures change. We don't speak Shakespearian English, and Shakespeare didn't speak like Chaucer.

One of the main problems with cultural relativism is that no one is allowed to criticise another culture because if right and wrong are relative, depending on the culture, then there is no objective way of assessing any idea of practice of a culture you do not belong to.

Thus, women within a reactionary minority culture can be condemned to accepting standards that would not be thought acceptable more generally, merely because "it's their culture" – which is of course a patronising, and we suggest racist, attitude in itself, assuming as it does that non-European cultures are not rational and inherently subject to "lower" standards.

One example is the debate over Female Genital Mutilation. It has been argued that western feminists have no right to argue against this practice and many women in the culture support the practice and want to go through with it. That may be the case but women have been struggling all over the world for centuries against patriarchy and there are also many women within the



*Protesting against FGM*



cultures themselves who are against FGM. So who do you support? Cultural relativists would rather support the 'official culture' than side with a universal movement against patriarchy no matter what culture.

Another example is in Australia where courts often accept that the First Peoples of Australia should be treated according to their own customs rather than what is seen as the colonial law of the European culture in Australia. Now on the surface this seems commendable. However, the courts are very selective. (They are quite happy to support land grabs and other attacks on Aboriginal culture but siding with the culture in the case of rape does not cost the ruling class any money!) In 2002 Pascoe Jamilmira claimed that forced sex with an unwilling partner, his under-16 wife-to-be, was justified because he was following his cultural tradition (<https://womensenews.org/2002/11/judge-rules-rape-aboriginal-girl-traditional/>). For cultural relativists, is rape ok if it is an integral part of a culture? And who decides what that culture is? The middle age man or the young woman?

In the face of relativism – the idea that values must be applied differently according to culture – we must have the courage of our convictions. If we believe something to be oppressive, we should say so. It is not racist to challenge discrimination within a cultural sub-group. This should be done by working with those from within that culture who are fighting it. For example, supporting and amplifying the work and words of feminists within cultures currently dominated by Islam. It must be done in a way that does not give succour to those who'd use such criticism as a cover for racism, but in a way that empowers those from that cultural background who face oppressions.

## **Cultural relativism and the anti-racist movement in the UK**

Cultural relativism has crept into the anti-racist movement in the UK and elsewhere. There is now, in what passes as antiracism, a trend that demands we treat people differently. It says that respecting difference means that someone's culture, ethnicity, religion and so on are so fundamental to their being, that we must treat them not according to universalised principles, but according to the internal mores of each individual culture. This has led to the uneasy feeling that any critique of an oppression that may occur in certain sections of a community is necessarily racist. Anti-racists have become so cowed by reactionary politics of difference that we shy from 'disrespecting' cultural identity by challenging or offending what is seen as the values, beliefs or ways of being of minority groups.

In many ways there has been a return to race, or biology. Racists were known for assigning certain characteristics to people with black or brown skin. Some anti-racists are in some ways doing the same. Black people born in Britain have had their culture shaped by their experiences in this country and this history is important. But it has nothing to do with a biological connection to other Black people. A programme on TV some time ago saw people using DNA markers to trace their geographic origins. British people were tracing back their genetic

ancestry. In one episode, some black Britons traced their genetic origins to specific areas of Africa. They had not known they had any connection with these specific areas before, nor of the culture of the area. But they came away saying that they had found out something about their own cultural identity. This is the sort of thing we mean when we say that there is a tendency to view cultural identity as a biological phenomenon. These people were mistaken in thinking they'd discovered anything about their cultural identity. They may have discovered something about their history, where they came from, but this is different than their cultural identity, which is passed socially, not by genetic markers.

This is the *biologicalisation* of the politics of difference – presenting cultural diversity as biologically based, rather than experience based. This is what makes distinguishing racism from antiracism increasingly difficult.

Instead of looking to see what people have in common as British working class, or even the international working class, the aim seems to search for differences.

## **Community leaders and top-down multi-culturalism**

“I want to question this easy assumption that pluralism is self-evidently good. I want to show, rather, that the notion of pluralism is both logically flawed and politically dangerous, and that creation of a ‘multicultural’ society has been at the expense of a more progressive one”.

Kenan Malik (<https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/523/against-multiculturalism>)



Kenan Malik

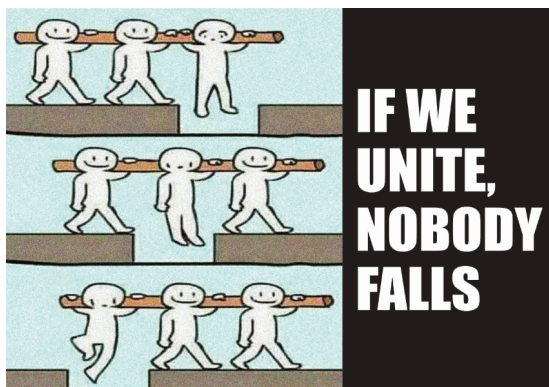
Kenan Malik is one of the most coherent and perceptive critics of ‘top-down multiculturalism’. He describes “the confusion between the lived experience of diversity and the policies enacted to manage that diversity. The first describes the experience of living in a society that has been made less insular and more vibrant through mass immigration, the second a set of political policies, the aim of which is to manage diversity by putting people into ethnic boxes, and using those boxes to shape public policy” (<https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/523/against-multiculturalism> and <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/06/canada-multiculturalism-europe>).



The problems of multiculturalism can be seen in the way people are categorised into different community groups depending on their ethnicity and/or religion. There certainly is a reason for this as people gathered in the same areas of a city as other people from the countries they migrated from. And as Malik says, this cultural diversity is one of the best features of urban life. However, this putting of people into boxes has led to divide and rule and makes it difficult for people to escape their culture if they want to, or to come together to fight common problems at work or in the community.

One aspect of the conservative nature of multi-culturalism is the way in which the State seeks out 'community leaders' to be the client leaderships that the ruling class can do business with, and to some extent co-opt. These leaders claim to be the 'authentic' representatives of a group of people. As with culture, community is also a much-misused term and often a myth. Just as cultures are not monolithic neither are communities. These client leaders are more conservative than the community they are supposed to represent and will always mean that the interests this relationship seeks to serve are the interests of capital.

So instead of working-class people in a community campaigning together over issues such as gentrification, or something like the Grenfell Tower disaster, different groups are formed, divided by religion and/or ethnicity, all under a 'community leader' or officially recognised organisation. The end result is a myriad of different organisations and groups, all keen to assert their differences from other groups who most likely are in the same position they are in. At best we may get some kind of alliance if the different groups agree to work together. Leaders are reluctant to have too much unity as it might undermine their own position. This is 'top-down multi-culturalism' – keeping people divided and not able to see what they have in common.



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## **The politics of identity: undermining the struggle of the working class against capitalism, oppression, and hierarchies**

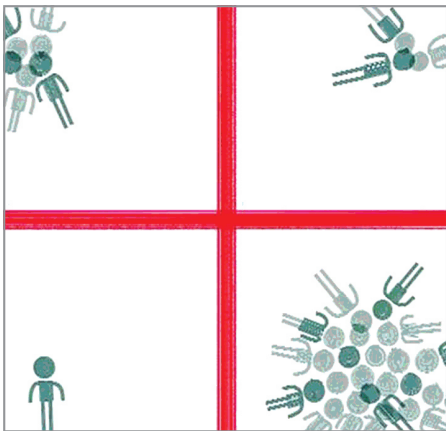
There are some positive features of the politics of identity – understanding that the working class is diverse and has internal conflict, ensuring that all voices within the class are heard, promoting tolerance to those who have different ways of life. However, it is based on the politics of division and acts as a major obstacle to revolutionary social change.

## Flawed analysis

In today's 'radical' politics there is an assumption, sometimes stated, sometimes unstated, but either way underpinning much of the thinking of the post-modern left, that identity and politics are a continuum. In this model, identity is politics and politics is identity. The one is but an aspect of the other. In this model, it is assumed that certain people will necessarily be drawn to 'radicalism' because of their identity, and that certain others will tend towards 'reactionary politics' because of theirs. This is *essentialism*: the view that any group of people has a particular set of attributes, set in stone that are necessary to its identity. Where does this analysis come from?

"Roots of this can be found in neoliberalism and its agenda of dissolving society into individuals and commodities. Of course, neoliberalism does not dissolve classes within production or the division of labour, but it dissolves the political potential of the working class through the individualisation of class. Which is why the left of today, in its inability to cope with the complete destruction of its historical counterpart through the 20th century, has decided to turn towards ideology and strategies of the far right, with its emphasis on the individual, its identity, ethnic romanticism and defence of culture and has replaced the class with it. The class interest of the working class is not what drives the left politics of today as the working class is viewed mainly as one of the 'underdog' identities."

[cominsitu.wordpress.com/2017/08/30/american-thought-from-theoretical-barbarism-to-intellectual-decadence/](http://cominsitu.wordpress.com/2017/08/30/american-thought-from-theoretical-barbarism-to-intellectual-decadence/)



So, for us, despite its origins in decent endeavour, identity politics is not now a revolutionary stance. It is not socialist (even in the broadest sense). It is not an opposition to structures of oppression, because it doesn't tackle those structures. But, further than that, it belongs alongside other reactionary viewpoints, because it uses biology to divide us, it apportions responsibility according to biology and identity, and in using the ideas of the reactionary right, ends up only serving the purposes of the ruling class.

Furthermore, because of the pervasiveness of this model, it is now the widespread common sense that the only way to respect the struggles of marginalised people is through this model. In this now dominant common sense, identity politics is just a synonym for anti-racism, for feminism, for opposition to homophobia and transphobia and so on. Just as Top-Down Multiculturalism is seen by so many as just a synonym for respecting diversity and inclusivity. And so, if one criticises identity politics, one is seen by many as opposing anti-racism, as

opposing feminism, and so on, because identity politics has become seen as the only way of doing those things. It is important to question not only whether identity politics is the only way of doing these things, and whether, in fact, it really does those things, but – more importantly – whether there are other, better, ways of doing them.

This does not mean that ‘class’ is more important than race, sexuality, gender etc. This is a category error that invariably comes up. This is a misrepresentation that comes about because people have become so used to seeing identity as the basis for politics that they can only see competing identities, nothing else.

If we say we are interested in class analysis, we are not putting forward some identitarian conception of class; there are no essential characteristics of being working class. We are talking about understanding social structures that prevent us from achieving social justice; social structures that prevent us, ultimately, from achieving self-government. We are not setting up “‘working class’” (or, worse still, ‘white working class’) as an identity. Class is imposed upon us by social systems, currently capitalism. The goal is to end capitalism and any class system - so class will no longer exist.

Class is the fundamental division in our society, not because it is more important in terms of affecting people’s lives than oppressions such as racism or sexism, but because it is the one thing that unites us into a potential revolutionary movement for an anarchist communist society. The vast majority of people are in the working class – they do not own the means of production and are forced to sell their labour to survive. We need to abolish the ruling class – whatever their gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality. Many other aspects of our society are determined by this economic system. The State acts in the interest of capital and many institutions, such as the police, education, and the media, reinforce capitalism. Every working-class person has more in common with other members of their class than with someone of their own ‘identity’ in the ruling class.

This doesn’t mean that there are not other divisions. Patriarchy has existed for thousands of years and permeates all social relations, often in the home and personal relationships. This makes it difficult to fight against in the same way we might fight exploitation at work. Colonialism has created deep-seated prejudices that play out in a variety of ways, creating



apartheid in both work and the community. But these are different from the class division. The ultimate enemy is not whites or men (though at times it may seem like they are!). There is a difference between dealing with the divisions and oppressions that exist within the class and overthrowing the ruling class. We need to have a vision of a united working class, even if there is much work to do in achieving real unity.

## **Identity politics leads to cross-class alliances**



If people feel they have more in common with others 'like them' – in other words, Black, women, trans, disabled etc, than with other members of the working class then you end up with alliances across class and co-option of the struggle by the ruling class. The Black Lives Matter protests involve all sorts of people with very different politics, and while some called to defund the police, others called for parity by employing more Black police.

Leaders emerge who then put themselves forward as representatives, often running for political office. Many heralded the victory of US Vice President, Kamala Harris, as a great step forward for both people of colour and women. LGBT+ pride has been permeated by corporate interests – they don't have to spend much money and corporations such as Santander and HSBC get free publicity with their floats on the parade. Putting more Black and Asian faces in advertising can actually sell products. How many Asian women would really like to claim affinity with UK Home Secretary, Priti Patel?

Racism and sexism are very useful for capitalism but in many ways it could accommodate reforms that would in fact make it stronger. Gender and racialised divisions of labour may serve some purposes but talent is often lost if only white men can hold down certain jobs.

It might be difficult to feel comradely to many racist and sexist members of the working class, yet it we are to be successful in not just making a few reforms but

creating a completely new society, then people have to begin to see that despite everything, they are more 'like' other members of the working class than they are to members of the ruling class, even if they share the same identity.

## **Reinforcing divisions: essentialising and hierarchies of privilege**



There are several ways in which identity politics reinforces divisions within the working class and derails struggles.

Different identities are associated with particular characteristics. Though these are often recognised as having social origins, identity politics has to an extent borrowed the language and concepts of the far right (and these have now been borrowed back by the so-called alt-right) and by using the language of biology. It has become common to see the formulation “you can’t understand my experiences because you don’t share my skin colour/chromosomes/mtDNA/brain chemistry etc”. People may not be able to fully understand the experience of others because a man or woman, Black or white person, will experience capitalism differently to an extent. But it is the experiences that matter not the biology.

This division of people into distinct groups then leads to competition into who is the most oppressed. Privilege theory, developed by academics, is used to create a hierarchy of oppressions. This applies even within particular identity groups. And being less privileged, belonging to more of the less privileged groups (women, trans, disabled, Black, etc) gives you more status and therefore the right to be listened to more than others. For example, in a mental health group, those whose disabilities were less visible were more privileged and therefore had less right to speak. People who come together in groups to struggle around what should be a common issue can get bogged down in endless arguments about who should be listened to more. This actually creates a power imbalance - aiming in theory to redress a power imbalance – but ending up just recreating hierarchies, and not actually focusing on the struggle itself.

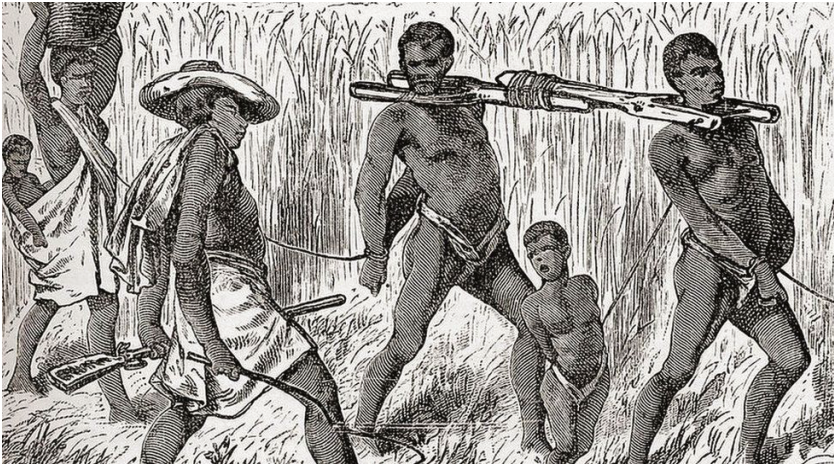


## Guilt and the Moral High Ground

“They came trudging up the hill from a soggy Epping Forest, a rag-tag huddle led by a young black woman. Behind her were five middle-aged white men and a 15-year-old boy, looped together by a length of chain. Around the necks of the boy and a man in his 60s was a makeshift wooden yoke that twisted the man’s head as they walked. Each of them, including a clutch of children running alongside – but not the black walkers – wore a T-shirt with the stark legend: “So sorry”.

Andrew Winter, a designer from London, gave up his job to join the latest tour. His wife Vonetta, who is from Barbados, is also on the walk, though she doesn’t wear a “So sorry” shirt. **Their mixed race son Josh, who is 10, sometimes wears one, sometimes doesn’t.** (Our bold).

(Marching to London to hear a single word ... sorry – Guardian  
[www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/mar/24/britishidentity.race](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/mar/24/britishidentity.race))



The African slave trade was one of the worst examples of humanity’s inhumanity in the history of the world. However, it is one thing for people to understand and learn about these horrendous events whether it be the slave trade, the Jewish genocide, or the treatment of women through much of history, it is another thing to hold those not directly involved responsible just because they share characteristics (skin colour, sex) with those who are responsible.

The tendency to group all whites, men, etc, into one group, another identity box, and then treat them all the same shows how identity politics is verging on the biological deterministic. People need to be held responsible for their actions but not by some spurious association by identity – identities that the person doesn’t even want but is forced upon them. If a person continues to deny the holocaust or says slavery was a positive part of European history, then they deserve to be taken to task. For most people, it is our responsibility to get on with fighting racism and sexism today, and not feeling guilty about the past.

Whatever your ancestry, if your parent, grandparent, great-grandparent, committed any crime, whatever that crime, no matter how serious – rape, murder, violent assault, anything – you are not responsible. Not even a little bit.

This focus on guilt and personal responsibility is where the liberal individualist approach runs into a dead end. By liberal, we don't just mean an analysis lacking rigour or steeped in weak and sentimental beliefs, but a response in which the collective is irrelevant, in which righting wrongs is a matter of internal individual morality, rather than practical joint effort. We in the ACG are interested in how a lesson is translated into action. Because otherwise, nothing useful has been learned, and no social change will occur. In the jargon, that is *praxis*. If your praxis is just miming a sad face and tears, like an attention-seeking, woke Marcel Marceau, then we aren't interested. We'll leave that to the liberal celebrities.

Giving social groups essential characteristics implies that individuals from oppressed groups are inherently better than those from other groups. So, if you are a woman or a person of colour you will be less likely to be an oppressor yourself. This also goes for the working class. It also has led to people thinking that the politics of some groups are better than others, just by virtue of coming from that group. (Yes, people who have experienced the oppression will be more likely to have developed good politics, but it is the experience not the fact that you identify with a social group.) The reverse is also a problem – assuming that whites are automatically racist or men sexist. This essentialising of people tends to give every member of an oppressed group the moral high ground. Firstly, some of these will actually be members of the ruling class. And, being part of an oppressed group – working class, Black, women, does not automatically make you a good person with the right politics. There is not one culture in the world that has not had its share of atrocities. There is no ethnic group or gender which can claim to be perfect.



Creating cultures of blame and guilt which does nothing to fight the oppressions. This stems from seeing that the origins of these issues are systemic. This does not mean to let people off the hook either for their behaviour, but people cannot be blamed for a system they didn't create, as long as they are fighting to get rid of the system now.



Not only does the liberal answer of parading tears and shame not help, it is actually turning the attention back on you. “Look at me, I’m in a hairshirt: reverse my right-on-ness”. You are not amplifying the voices of others or aiding their self-determination and empowerment if you are literally hogging the stage for your self-flagellation rituals.

This is true too of the white people who paraded their shame at their privilege at Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the summer of 2020, lining up to cry on podiums in parks across the world. It is not adequate to shed tears that a black person is more likely to be stopped and searched, or more likely to have inadequate housing, or more likely to have low paid jobs, or any of the myriad other ways that racism impacts black people rather than white people. What is needed is practical solidarity and struggle, bringing together all those in the working class who are being exploited and oppressed by the ruling class. An example of this is the way many different groups have come together against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill – in recognition that all the working class will be at the receiving end of repressive police powers, rather than bicker about who suffers most at the hands of the police.

Guilt is misapplied, misdirected, and warped by a woefully incomplete world view. It doesn’t help the enslaved peoples of capitalism’s history. It doesn’t help those struggling to throw off the yoke of modern slavery. And it ultimately leaves the capitalist system itself unscathed.

We prefer a practical response to racism, based on empowerment, class solidarity, and community interest, rather than one based on internal individual reflection on morality, guilt, and shame.

## **Who benefits from oppressive systems? Making others in the working class the enemy**

Another feature of identity politics is the tendency to claim that there are privileged groups within the working class who directly benefit from the oppression of others and therefore become the enemy. Clearly, the ruling class benefits from the way society is organised – they reap the benefits from their ownership and control of the means of production and the expropriation of the products of labour. They also benefit from the gender and racialised division of labour. So do white workers benefit from discrimination against people of colour? Do men benefit from patriarchy? In some ways yes. It should be recognised that because of racism, white people, males, or any group not subject to a particular discrimination, have a relative advantage. The slave trade provided enormous wealth that did raise the standard of living of the European nations. Having women do all the work around the home, raising the children plus going out to work has given men more time to go out with their mates.

Studies show that teachers subconsciously and unintentionally give boys in the classroom eight times more attention than girls. (Sadker and Sadker, 2004 [www.sadker.org/PDF/TextbooksandGenderEquity.pdf](http://www.sadker.org/PDF/TextbooksandGenderEquity.pdf)). This is just one of the mechanisms by which boys learn of the weight their voices are given. And it’s not

just the boys who learn this: girls will also feel that the boys aren't getting "their due" if a teacher tries to give girls more parity. The social norms of our society – including sexist, racist, and other prejudiced expectations – are internalised by us all, and it is often only through educating ourselves that we even see the social norms we have imbibed and assimilated from childhood for what they are.

However, to go on to say that white men are therefore more privileged and have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo is a serious error of analysis. The only ones who really benefit from these divisions is the ruling class.



Asad Haider, editor of *Viewpoint* magazine, outlines the argument that "white skin privilege" is detrimental to the whole working class including white members of it. It's "an instrument of class division" and is effective in control precisely by "preventing unity with black workers." He quotes Noel Ignatiev: "The ideology of white chauvinism is bourgeois poison aimed primarily at the white workers, utilised as a weapon by the ruling class to subjugate black and white workers. It has its material base in the practice of white supremacy, which is a crime not merely against non-whites but against the entire proletariat. Therefore, its elimination certainly qualifies as one of the class demands of the entire working class". ([www.viewpointmag.com/2017/01/06/white-purity/](http://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/01/06/white-purity/))

Activist Richard Moser, writing in *Counterpunch*, covers similar ground, when he outlines the view of working-class Marxist writer, Theodore Allen's, view that "white privileges are contrary to the long-term political and material interest of white people. The benefits, bribes, and appeals to white people do have a real value, which is one reason they work, but that value is far less than the value that would be produced by class solidarity and cross-racial action to raise wages, win political power and establish justice." ([www.counterpunch.org/2017/08/14/white-skin-privilege/](http://www.counterpunch.org/2017/08/14/white-skin-privilege/)).

So, while we recognise and acknowledge that certain groups have had advantages relative to others, we emphasise that the useful response is not the liberal reflex of personal guilt, but through solidarity and practical action.

If we see all outsiders as oppressors, and disallow them, then how do we win them over? If only the 'right' people can be pure fighters against ableism (or racism, transphobia, sexism etc), then how can it ever be defeated?

In an episode of the BBC TV panel show, *Have I Got News For You*, an item about racism was being discussed and the Black comedian Reginald D. Hunter was on the panel. The rest of the panel and the host looked to him for an answer. He replied something along the lines of "Hell, am I the only one allowed to know this is wrong? You folks just can't tell one way or another?" And that's exactly where we've ended up.

## **Identity politics kills freedom of expression and suppresses debate**



Another casualty of identity politics and the cult of individuality is the attack on free speech and freedom of expression. 'Cancel Culture', 'wokeness', no platforming have become weapons of repression both for the far right and followers of identity politics.

Rather than engage in political or ideological argument, or attempt to educate people or discuss important issues, increasingly speakers, theorists, activists are being peremptorily and publicly shut down and silenced because they offend a certain group. 'Witch-hunts' against individuals who are deemed guilty of this offence become commonplace and effective. This is censorship of an arbitrary and personalised nature. At best, it can only lead to bitterness and resentment

and, at worst, to active repression and is well on the road towards authoritarianism and fascism. Whatever happened to winning the hearts and minds of the people?

This censorious ideology has led the right/far right to repossess and redefine the notion of 'free speech' to mean permission for the far-right to express their ideology openly, whilst shutting down any more liberal or left-wing viewpoint. This is a dangerous and scary first step on the road to fascism and must be opposed.

## **Alternatives: fighting capitalism and oppressions**

A more effective approach is to support the self-organisation of oppressed groups into autonomous groups, that still have a link to the general working-class movement. Others in the working class can show practical solidarity, furthering the self-activity and empowerment of these groups. This is an alternative to identity politics as well as to a class reductionist approach.

Women activists and trade unionists have often been accused of 'dividing the working class' by demanding women's organisation and specific action on women's issues or safe spaces. Likewise, people of colour have been accused of the same when demanding autonomous organisation, acknowledgement of the long history of oppression, or particular attention to racism. We need to distinguish between an analysis of individual identity leading to a competing hierarchy of oppression and a will to organise collectively with other activists with common experience and interests.

Many left organisations have (and some still do) pronounced that the separate autonomous organisation of specific groups is diversionary and contrary to a class politics analysis. As anarchist communists, we, however, support autonomous organisation and the struggles arising from it and assert a practical and theoretical difference. We are clear that there is a difference between identity politics on the one hand and autonomous organisation on the other. The first focuses only on the oppression of the group; the latter recognises that there is no anti-capitalist perspective that may see other workers as the enemy.

Autonomous organisations will also focus on key issues for a particular oppressed group, realising that such an organisation is necessary to push demands forward and increase confidence. However, other workers are not the enemy – they may be an obstacle at times – but the aim is to win them over through a show of strength and dialogue.

Autonomous organisation has proved effective in giving a voice to groups which have previously had their voices stifled or minimised because of the ruling ideology and the reality that power mostly lies with straight, white, able-bodied men. For example, in the trade union movement, thirty or forty years ago, there were very few women or Black activists, and the workplace and social issues important to them largely went ignored. If we look at the case of women: by having autonomous women's groups, it was possible to formulate demands and organise locally and more widely. Sexual harassment, domestic abuse, bullying,



menstruation, menopause, reproductive rights, unequal pay, difficult shifts, part-time workers' rights and so on have become part of the mainstream union agenda. As a revolutionary political organisation, we must support the self-organisation of groups and listen to their voices. This is not the same as promoting the rights of individuals because of their identity. Nor is it the same as accepting a view that certain identities carry more importance and weight than others, leading to squabbling and fighting amongst ourselves. Collective action to further class struggle, inclusive of all voices within the class, must be our aim. As a political organisation we support the self-organisation of groups and listen to their voices. This is not the same as promoting the rights of individuals because of their identity.

Within many organisations, including trade unions, autonomous groups have only been allowed an 'advisory' role; or have been side-lined as a 'talking shop'. As anarchist communists we recognise the right of autonomous groups to set their own agenda and help set the agenda of the wider group, where their decisions will influence the practice of the whole organisation.

But there's a further stage. The next stage is to build these struggles both into the way we frame our activity and into the way we understand the system we are trying to overthrow. Silvia Federici wrote: "the immense amount of paid and unpaid domestic work done by women in the home is what keeps the world moving" (p2, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 2011), applying the idea of the "social factory", that "capitalist relations become so hegemonic that every social relation in subsumed under capital and the distinction between society and factory collapses, so that society becomes a factory and social relations directly become relations of production" (p7, 2011). In other words, capitalism directly benefits from sexism and misogyny. It directly benefits from racism (indeed the industrial revolution was literally brought into being on the backs of slaves in the cotton



fields, without whom the cotton mills of Northern England would have had no raw materials). In the autumn of 2020, stories began to surface in the media of black barristers who were assumed by court officials to belong in the dock, rather than the bench and bar. The lesson is not that more black role models are needed at the top of the legal professions, but that the legal system is racist through and through. If society's racist common-sense assumption is that a black person cannot potentially be a legal professional, how can a black person convince the system that they are potentially innocent? This is about the nuanced layers of the structures of state and capital.

These struggles are not separate from the struggle against capitalism; they are integral to it.

## Identity politics and neo-liberalism



Identity politics, in the sense we have described it, is a response to material conditions. However, it became adopted by neoliberalism because they had identity issues that they wanted to address. As David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), the neoliberal project offered to those who had been the radicals of the 1960s the compromise of freedoms for some, instead of equality for all. This is why, in the sense we describe identity politics, has become effective in ensuring diversity in the managerial classes, but these advantages don't seep into the working classes. This failing (actually, not a failing, since that's its purpose) has been critiqued at length by writers such as Kenan Malik, bell hooks, Karen and Barbara Fields, and Asad Haider.

This very individualist and liberal (in the sense meant by Raymond Williams in *Keywords*, that is seeing social problems in terms of individual morality, but with a hint of liberal as meaning 'not having a very robust argument') form of response to oppressions does indeed stem from material conditions, but it has

gained the ascendancy in contemporary culture. It informs the response of TV panellists, it informs soap opera and sitcom scriptwriters, it informs HR awareness training sessions, it informs the cultural consensus on sensitivity towards the gamut of identity issues. It has this position in contemporary common sense because the class which is the dominant material force in society is therefore the dominant cultural and intellectual force. As Marx and Engels say (in *The German Ideology*), the ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas.

And that ruling class is quite satisfied with the divide and rule effect of identity politics. This is why rebuilding solidarity and re-identifying the correct targets (i.e. not each other!) is the way to proceed.

- 1 The working class, who, having no ownership of the means of production - factories, plant and so on - are forced to sell their labour power for a wage.
- 2 The dominant ruling class interests, by which power is consolidated.

## Conclusion

Let us therefore confirm: women comrades, our enemy is not men, it is the sexist and misogynist structures of capitalism; black comrades, our enemy is not white people it is the racist structures of capitalism; gay comrades, our enemy is not straight people, it is the homophobic structures of capitalism; trans comrades, our enemy is not cis people, it is the transphobic structures of capitalism; disabled comrades, our enemy is not currently able people, it is the ableist structures of capitalism.

This is why we echo the words of Fred Hampton of the Black Panther Party:

***“We’re going to fight racism not with racism, but we’re going to fight with solidarity. We say we’re not going to fight capitalism with black capitalism, but we’re going to fight it with socialism”.***





## Readings

### On Multiculturalism

Kwame Anthony Appiah put it in the Ethics of Identity (2005)  
*press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691130286/the-ethics-of-identity*

*newhumanist.org.uk/articles/523/against-multiculturalism*

*kenanmalik.com/2018/09/24/from-equal-rights-to-staying-in-your-lane/Reading/sources*

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*www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2014/09/25-years-women-working-against-fundamentalism-in-the-uk*

### On Identity Politics

*www.seattleweekly.com/news/a-marxist-critiques-identity-politics/*

*www.viewpointmag.com/2017/03/16/identity-crisis/*

*cominsitu.wordpress.com/2017/08/*

### On Populism

*kenanmalik.com/2017/10/05/populism-and-immigration/*

### Biologicalisation of culture

*archive.senseaboutscience.org/data/files/resources/119/Sense-About-Genetic-Ancestry-Testing.pdf*

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- Land and Liberty £2.00
- Whatever happened to the Revolution? £2.00
- The Italian Factory Councils and the Anarchists £2.50
- Is Class Still Relevant? £1.50
- The Wilhelmshaven Revolt: A Chapter of the Revolutionary Movement in the German Navy 1918-1919 by 'Ikarus' (Ernst Schneider) £3.50
- Our NHS? Anarchist Communist Thoughts on Health (*out of print but soon to be reprinted with updates*)
- The Fight for the City (*out of print but available for free download*)

### Podcasts

Key ideas of anarchist communism including: what is anarchist communism, work, crime, war, internationalism and more!

<https://anchor.fm/anarchistcommunism>

### ACG on Youtube

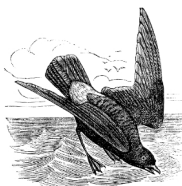
An exciting series of videos now being produced. Have a look!

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBhViL9VIUoROBjVske0aMA/>

To be human is to negotiate a balance between individual identity and collective action. We are each simultaneously individuals and social animals. This pamphlet does not seek to negate identity. Identity is important to our humanity, as well as being a major focus for oppression. What it seeks to do, rather, is to place revolutionary politics in the collective sphere. When anarchist-communists echo Kropotkin in saying “What we proclaim is The Right to Well-Being: Well-Being for All!” we are advancing a vision for a free society, the society we want to build.

In recent decades politics has moved a long way from expressing what it is we want to achieve and has instead refocused on expressing who it is I am and what I believe my heritage or essential characteristics to be, and this is often an emotive and painful issue, especially where, as so often, there has been a history of oppression and subjugation. While these are indeed important enquiries and will of course inform each individual’s perspective on what needs to change in our quest for a better society, this pamphlet argues that to be effective revolutionary politics must be about that shared future we seek to build. What makes each of us an anarchist communist – or whatever vision it is you might hold – is that set of values we will build the future upon.

This pamphlet is presented with respect for our many struggles and in anger at our many experiences of oppression, determined that our collective efforts will build a better future.



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